

INSTRUCTORS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE USE OF AN ONLINE INSTRUCTIONAL TOOL IN AN ACADEMIC ENGLISH SETTING IN KUWAIT

Dr. Deniz Erguvan
Asst Prof, English Department
Gulf University for Science and Technology, Kuwait.
Erguvan.D@gust.edu.kw

ABSTRACT

This study sets out to explore the faculty members' perceptions of a specific web-based instruction tool (Achieve3000) in a private higher education institute in Kuwait. The online tool provides highly differentiated instruction, which is initiated with a level set at the beginning of the term. The program is used in two consecutive courses as part of the coursework, with the main focus on Academic English skills. For that purpose, 8 faculty members, 6 of which have used it for the first time, have been interviewed. The questions have been designed to seek responses about faculty members' perceptions of using the branded program in EAP practice, perceptions related to the strengths and weaknesses of the program, opinions about the contribution to student learning, and student attitudes towards web-based instruction. The analysis of the data reveal that participants have positive views towards differentiated instruction and seem to think this is one of the major strengths of the ICT tool. In addition to this instructors think ICT motivates students, adds variety to class, but it makes them question their role in the classroom, and also aggravates the already existing plagiarism endemic among students.

Key words: differentiated instruction, ICT in (ELT) English Language Teaching, EAP (English for Academic Purposes), academics' perceptions

INTRODUCTION

Passively listening to the audio tapes, repeating after the teacher have become things of the past now in an EFL class. Computers and the Internet have changed foreign language learning for good. Information communication technologies, an umbrella term for using computers, software, or Internet for instructional purposes (Hew & Brush, 2007, p. 225), refers to the use of technology by teachers for instructional preparation, instructional delivery, and technology as a learning tool for students (Inan & Lowther, 2010). ICT have been integrated into many aspects of education, and particularly into English language curricula providing learners and teachers with a broad spectrum of resources for higher language achievement. The use of ICT in language teaching and learning, which is also referred as computer-assisted language learning (CALL) developed from the earliest stages in audio tapes, word processing, and CD-ROM to Internet, whiteboard, social networking sites, email and other forms of technology including PowerPoint presentations.

Keeping students interested and engaged in an activity may be a challenge for ESL/EFL teachers, and CALL provides new possibilities for assisting teachers to successfully meet this challenge. CALL can energize the students (Lee, 2000), and offer some advantages such as the reduction of long-term costs, and increased opportunities for access to various sources of information, increased opportunities for communication and personalization of the teaching process (Jorge, Jorge, Gutiérrez, García & Díaz, 2003). By using authentic materials with visuals and animations, posting and replying messages, writing and replying emails, learning is no longer restrained in time and space; rather, through the internet, learners are offered opportunities to communicate and learn collaboratively whenever and wherever they want. The students display an enhanced sense of achievement and increase in self-directed learning, with the ability to communicate, conduct research and present ideas effectively beyond the confines of the class (Shetzer & Warschauer, 2000).

The field of ICT and Computer Assisted Language Learning is highly eclectic and these diverse activities of CALL represent a variety of ways that support learning (Levy, 1997, p. 41). As there is no one single method, technique, approach, or course book that work well perfectly in every context, a single type of CALL may not correspond to all needs and fit all learners' preferences. Evaluation consists of getting a clear understanding of what the tool actually offers in terms of input and interaction, and then judging how closely it fits learner's needs as determined by their preferences and learning objectives.

In order to maximize the effectiveness of using ICT we need to think carefully about how it will be integrated into the language learning curriculum. Albirini (2004) expresses that as a recent educational innovation, the computerization of education is a complex process where many agents play a role. Many factors should be considered for a successful implementation of CALL, such as students and teachers' attitudes, expectations and needs, as well as technological and organizational infrastructure, and the curriculum. However, the human force of the educational system, teachers and students, seem to be the most influential agents in facilitating or impeding changes that are outside the control of the ministries of education, and any successful transformation in

educational practice requires the development of positive user attitude toward the new technology (Pelgrum, 2001).

Recent studies have shown that the successful implementation of educational technologies depends largely on the attitudes of educators, who eventually determine how they are used in the classroom. Bullock (2004) found that teachers' attitudes are a major enabling and disabling factor in the adoption of technology. Similarly, Kersaint, Horton, Stohl, and Garofalo (2003) found that teachers who have positive attitudes toward technology feel more comfortable using it and usually incorporate it into their teaching. The development of teachers' positive attitudes toward CALL is a key factor for enhancing computer integration (Watson Todd, 2003). Internet based instruction can be effective only with the teacher's role as a "facilitator" who plans, designs and guides the lesson (Brandl, 2002).

Background and Objectives of the Study

This study sets out to explore the faculty members' perceptions of a specific web-based instruction tool. The online tool is used in two consecutive courses, with the main focus on Academic English skills. According to the course descriptions, the courses aim to develop students' writing and reading skills, and both courses involve critical reading and thinking skills and emphasize writing as a process.

EAP - English for Academic Purposes – refers to the language and associated practices that people need in order to undertake study or work in English medium higher education. The objective of an EAP course is to help these people learn some of the linguistic and mainly institutional and disciplinary practices involved in studying or working through the medium of English (Gillett, 2011). EAP teaching is task based, and it uses the types of academic task commonly found in higher education. Writing classes are usually based on some kind of authentic extended writing task that the students do in their own time, with the help of in-class teaching and individual tutorial support. Reading is similar with students doing large amounts of in-class and out of class reading - usually of authentic texts, as well as the lecturer helping the students to be more aware of typical language used in academic texts, text structure and strategies for reading critically and dealing with difficulties (Gillett & Wray, 2006).

According to Watson Todd (2003), there are six approaches on which teaching EAP generally places a greater emphasis than other types of English teaching, and integrating technology is one them. Modern nature of technological resources in many EAP situations enables EAP to be at the forefront of using technology for language teaching. EAP situations are generally better resourced than other situations of English language teaching and because EAP course objectives may include technology-oriented goals, technology has played an important role in teaching EAP in the last few years. The nature of EAP situations, then, often allows approaches to be used which other situations may wish to use but which are constrained by practical factors.

According to the website of the program, it provides web-based, differentiated instruction solutions designed to reach a school's entire student population. Among a variety of literacy solutions they provide, the one that constitutes the subject of this research is ELL, which targets English language learners at a college readiness level. Students who have subscription to the web page receive daily content and they proceed with the guidance of their instructors. ELL solution integrates language skills, activates background knowledge, focuses on vocabulary and explicitly teaches reading strategies (Achieve3000, 2012).

A concept that should be emphasized about the ICT tool is "differentiated instruction". Differentiated Instruction (DI) is a teaching and learning philosophy that emphasizes students at the core. Because each student is different, DI stresses that one style of teaching will not match every student's learning style. DI allows teachers to vary learning activities, content, assessment, and the classroom environment to meet the needs and support the growth of each child. In other words, teachers vary content, process, and product for each learner – from prekindergarten to college (Stanford & Reeves, 2009, p. 3). Teacher is the one to decide on the type and area of differentiation, taking into serious consideration the particular needs of each student.

Researchers and educators in favor of differentiated teaching believe that it is the answer to equity and effectiveness for all in mixed ability classrooms and academic improvement of students by differentiated teaching is supported by various research studies (Valiende & Tarman, 2011, pp. 172-173). However time constraints, class size and workload often prevent teachers from moving away from the "one size fits all" approach. This is why the need for integration of ICT in the learning process is now greater than ever and the potential of ICT, to promote new teaching objectives, change traditional teaching practices and develop new teaching methods has been noticed and emphasized by many researchers (Jonassen, 2000).

By analyzing the reading and writing strategies that are emphasized within the five step routine, the ICT tool looks like an ideal solution for teaching Academic English to second language learners. Task-based instruction, integrated with authentic texts with both in and out of class options, authentic extended writing task which yields itself to process writing and differentiated instruction are the strengths of the online instruction tool.

The online instructional tool has been used by the English Department since February 2011. At the beginning of every semester faculty members receive in-service training through video conferencing, and are encouraged to send their questions and concerns by e-mail to the professional development staff in the company. The program targets reading 40 articles and answering the comprehension and essay writing questions related to the article that has been read. This ICT tool comprises 40% of the course assessment, so students are highly recommended to complete their reading and writing activities so that they can get higher grades at the end of the course.

Despite some similar previous experiences in other countries all over the world, this has been an innovative approach in EAP instruction in Kuwait. This year, with new faculty sharing the web-based instruction experience, it has been deemed necessary to ask faculty their opinions about the implementation of the program and the feedback they get from their students.

Purpose of the Study

Current trends in education have spurred competitiveness among universities as they seek new ways to attract students not only in traditional environments but also in the online environment. In both, it is important to ensure high levels of student learning and achieve a better understanding of students' needs in relation to their learning (Armstrong, 2011). Online education can be improved and its value as an educational tool may be increased by getting feedback from teachers and students on a regular basis. By investigating ways that faculty members perceive and interact with the learning environment, the design of the online learning environment can be better developed to support learning.

For that purpose, 8 faculty members, 6 of which have used it for the first time, have been interviewed and asked about their perspectives of the online program. The questions in the interview have been designed to seek responses about faculty members' perceptions of using the branded program in EAP practice, perceptions related to the strengths and weaknesses of the program, opinions about the contribution to student learning, and student attitudes towards the web-based instruction.

Significance of the Study

Despite the abundance of research on teacher and student attitudes and perspectives towards computer, use of ICT and CALL in class, studies regarding the use of Information and Communication Technologies in teaching Academic English in higher education are scarce. In addition, studies within the context of Gulf counties, in particular, Kuwait are very rare and this research is the first that is carried out in a Kuwaiti higher education institute.

Gulf countries are the primary providers of education for their youth, and over the past 40 years, they have put their oil wealth by investing heavily in education. Nevertheless, major problems remain in GCC education systems and some indicators, such as the mean number of years of schooling (6.1 years in Kuwait) and high dropout rates are a serious issue in the GCC region. According to a survey conducted in 2010 (AlMunajjed & Sabbagh), when participants were asked the reasons of their discontent with their education system, 63% listed traditional methods of teaching as the main reason. Traditional teaching methods in the GCC countries emphasize repetition and memorization rather than skills highly valued in the modern workplace, such as creative thinking, brainstorming, problem solving, and personal initiative. Outmoded curricula and textbooks were mentioned as another source of dissatisfaction because they are not preparing students to succeed in rapidly changing societies that aspire to become knowledge-based economies in competitive global markets. These deficiencies require a commitment by Gulf societies to address curricula, teaching methods, and the use of information and communications technology (ICT) in schools (AlMunajjed & Sabbagh, 2010). This finding seems to serve the purpose of this research, which is aiming to get student feedback through teacher perspectives of using a new teaching method and applying ICT in the classroom of a Gulf country higher education classroom.

Another significance of this study is that it analyzes, among other facilities the ICT tool provides, whether differentiated instruction is perceived as a strength by the participants. Differentiated instruction is a hot topic in the educational sciences and the integration of ICT into differentiated instruction has recently begun to emerge as a research topic in the literature. The participants' opinions on how the online tool differentiates content, process and product will also be analyzed in participants' interviews.

METHOD

This study has used qualitative research methods. Within the scope of the research, in-depth interviews with semi-structured questions were conducted in order to obtain faculty views and perspectives about Achieve3000.

The population of the study consists of all of the 8, 4 male and 4 female academics who used this program in 2012-2013 Fall in the English department of a private Kuwaiti university. Kuwait is a culturally diversified country, and the nationalities of the participants reflect this reality, with 2 Americans, 2 Indians, 1 British, 1 Jordanian, 1 New Zealander and 1 Russian. All participants have extensive experience in teaching English at a college level and have similar backgrounds such as English literature, English language teaching or educational sciences. 4 academics that were interviewed have MA's and 4 of them hold PhD degrees. When asked, 6 of them mentioned having used ICT before, and they all expressed a positive attitude towards ICT. 2 participants mentioned this was their first time with ICT and they did not express a negative or a positive attitude towards the use of internet and communication technologies in teaching foreign languages.

Data Collection Tool

8 participants were interviewed on their perspectives of the online instruction tool and asked various questions. Literature and expert opinion were consulted with in the preparation of these questions. For the purpose of the research problem, the open-ended questions posed to the participants are as follows:

1. What are your perceptions of the strengths of the program?
2. What are your perceptions of the weaknesses of the program?
3. What do you think of students' attitudes towards the web-based instruction?
4. Would you recommend this program to your colleagues?

Academics' names are kept confidential, and the participants are only given codes. While giving direct quotes from the participant, the "code number" is given.

Data Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed and converted into typed text. To ensure reliability and validity, academics were presented the interview texts for their approval before using the text for analysis. Direct quotations by the interviewed individuals were used and consistency within the opinion was analyzed to ensure inner reliability.

The content analysis procedure that was applied for the analysis of the interviews is "categorical analysis". The raw data was converted into codes and categories. In this context, a paragraph that expresses a complete opinion was specified as the unit of analysis. Quantitative demographic data were also assessed and presented under the concerned heading. Qualitative research findings and their interpretation were created by analyzing the views of participants under certain categories.

Findings

Findings Related To Participants' Perceptions of the Program's Strengths and Contributions to Student Learning

a. Strengths

During the interview, the first question that was asked to the participants was, "What are your perceptions of the strengths of the program?" Table 1 shows the perceptions related to the strengths of the program.

Table 1: Perceptions regarding the Program's Strengths

Strength	Frequency
More motivating than conventional methods /students do more work	6
Differentiated instruction	5
Students are exposed to different types of exercises	3
Easy and flexible access to information / valuable database	3
Ease of making lesson plans/filing and sharing info	2

Academics mentioned a variety of positive aspects of the online program, ranging from motivation to adding variety and even ease of filing student papers. The most frequently cited perception with 6 participants is that the program is thought to be more motivating than any other conventional method and as a result students get to do more work than they would in a regular class setting. Some opinions of participants are quoted as follows:

Before we started using this program, I used to give them handouts, and only 20 % used to read. With the computer program, most of them read the texts. It is really good and motivating. It makes learning and teaching interesting (P 3).

It is a way for students to produce a lot more work than they would be able to otherwise. It motivates students highly, it is highly motivational and I am amazed at the amount of writing I get out of students. 40 essays is way more than I could get from a normal class (P 7).

What is common in these perceptions is that according to the instructors, this program motivates students to get more involved in reading and writing activities than any traditional textbook or writing assignment could achieve. According to Participant 2, the reason is “new generation” of students:

One thing is because of this generation of kids ...to hold their interest you have to use this... a few of them would rather use just white board, but most of them, in fact all of my students are interested in computers and electronics (P 2).

The second strength was perceived to be the differentiated instruction the program provides. With the help of a built-in exam taken at the beginning of each academic term, the program sets a level for every student and sends reading and writing tasks at differentiated levels. As a student demonstrates progress in reading comprehension, the rigor of the text increases. This feature was highly favored by 5 participants. Some participants made the following comments:

I like that it is differentiated, that the students can get their own reading levels. I can tell these student they can do these articles, no excuses...The fact that these articles are at their levels gives them a reading practice that they can get nowhere else. It is important for fluency, the speed of reading (P 4).

The strongest aspect of the program is they work at different levels; this has always been such a problem in any composition class. I like the fact there is test at the beginning and they work at their levels. I don't have to apologize to students for the difficulty of the text. It was always a big issue for me, I always felt guilty for weak students, adapting the level for the general level, so I think differentiated instruction is really helpful (P 8).

Differentiated learning seems to be lifting all the excuses that the students can make related to the difficulty of the task and win even the weakest students in the class. This component of the program is considered to be strength even by the most skeptical user of the program with the following remark:

Frankly the only strength that I find about the program is it gives students a level set exam at the beginning because if you have a general level set for everyone, students with low reading abilities become depressed because they cannot read and understand, so they give up (P 2)

The next strength as perceived by 3 participants is the variety of questions, exercises and tasks the program provides. Participants seem to think this exposes students to different materials that should be stimulating enough for a keen language learner.

It allows the student to respond in so many ways, whether it is summarizing, making questions or responding to individual questions, multiple choice, writing essays of different lengths, if they want to take advantage of it, it allows them to do as much as or as little as they like (P 6).

The online program is a rich database of reading articles. This fact has been mentioned by 3 participants and they have also commented on the value of having such an easy access to thousands of articles for users:

I remember myself teaching composition, trying to find an interesting text, coming up with comprehension questions, I couldn't find enough in the books, and photocopying them ... I did a lot of work myself. This digital database saves teachers from the trouble of preparing materials (P 8).

The program is a mass of information, readily available for students and teachers to use. It allows students to access so much that in my opinion in Kuwait they would never be able to access (P 6).

Some participants also commented on the practicalities of the program for instructors, such as filing, storing information, not worrying about losing student papers. The remark made by Participant 7 reflects the relief of a busy language instructor:

Also it files everything effectively, I don't have to worry about filing students and papers, and it is easy to manage (P 7).

As a result, the program tends to have strengths that are appreciated by the instructors, and differentiated instruction is noticed as a strong point of the program.

b. Contributions to Student Learning

Following this question, the participants were asked whether these strengths have contributed to student learning, and which skills have improved due to the exposure to the online program. This question was asked to find out the effect of the program in an academic English class with a primary focus on writing and reading skills. Participants generally think that the program has contributed to student learning in a variety of skills. A total of 11 positive responses, as opposed to 3 negative responses tend to highlight the positive effects of the program. The answers are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: Contribution to Student Learning

Skills	Frequency
Reading	5
Vocabulary	3
Writing	3
Not sure	3

Participants mostly seem to express the positive effect on reading skills, which is followed by vocabulary and writing skills. In an academic English class, with a major focus on writing, this program appears to lack a strong writing component, as seen in participant comments.

Similar to findings about the strengths, participants appreciate the fact that the program offers many opportunities to students so that they read and analyze various reading texts.

I can't imagine their not improving reading an article, guessing what the questions will be; reading in terms of what they think will be asked. That must have improved naturally if they have done it (P 4).

It depends on their input, which is basically reading. If they read, they will learn more vocabulary and better sentence structures. All in all, most of them have got slightly and relatively better command of English (P 5).

Reading is even more effective than writing. Reading and vocabulary ... (P 7)

Those who are not sure whether the strengths have contributed to student learning mention the system's susceptibility to manipulation:

I hope so. I don't know if I can know that. I can't tell because some things are out of the class, out of my control, and you can't always control cheating (P 4).

Students take exams at the beginning and at the end of the term. Test scores generally show that their reading levels have gone up 2-3 levels for many students. However, if you ask me, I have no answer for that. The system shows there is, but I cannot always see an improvement. Students have access to their previous answers and those who used for the 2nd time, use their old responses (P 3).

Maybe the final comment covers it all by saying, for students who take it seriously, i.e., who don't cheat and manipulate the system; the program has a lot to offer:

They are exposed to lots of reading material. If they take it seriously, they will benefit from writing as well. Given that it is difficult to get students to write on their own, this program makes them do this. They are exposed to lots of vocabulary, and also because the program itself has a vocabulary list per article, this is maybe the only way they can have constant exposure to grammar formations, syntax,

vocabulary, expression, argument, description, because there are many types of articles and they can have the exposure to all of them. If they take it seriously they could benefit a lot in aspects of the learning outcome (P 6).

It could be concluded that the majority of participants, with some reservations, think contributing to student learning is one of the strengths of the program.

Findings Related To Participants' Perceptions of the Program's Weaknesses

During the interview, the second question that was asked to the participants was, "What are your perceptions of the weaknesses of the program?" Table 3 shows the responses to this question.

Table 3: Perceptions regarding the Program's Weaknesses

Weakness	Frequency
Grading/technical difficulties	5
Plagiarism/Open to manipulation	5
Topics/types of articles	5
Teacher's role/ Management of the course	4
Failing to contribute in some skills	4

The challenges which the instructors met and perceived as 'weaknesses' while they were using the program could be categorized under 5 headings. Interestingly, the top 3 weaknesses have the same frequency and were mentioned by 5 out of 8 participants. The second highly mentioned weakness follows this group closely with 4 participants.

The load of grading, the difficulty of grading, technical shortcomings related to grading and giving feedback to students and any other technical problems that were encountered related to the program was the first and foremost problem that was expressed by the participants.

Some participant comments will clarify the technical challenges of the online database.

We can't grade them accurately, feedback options are very limited, and that's a problem. Also, grading they get is not detailed enough, we can't correct their writing, we give general comments, you cannot give detailed feedback. You just have to copy and paste for their answers, and it takes time (P 8).

Another user of the program comments on a technical shortcoming related to calculating scores for students and comes up with a suggestion:

This program should have a built in calculating table to help the instructor to monitor and tabulate the scores the students have obtained in each reading. Doing calculations on an excel sheet outside the system is time-consuming (P 1).

The next participant comments on the issue of grading from the workload perspective and emphasizes that the motivational power of the program can bring some burden for instructors who will eventually grade them.

If students get seriously involved in this, the teachers will definitely be overwhelmed with the amount they have to mark. Students generally leave it to the last minute, last semester I found myself marking over 500 thought questions in a single weekend. The weekend before I had maybe 400 hundred, a weekend before it was 300 hundred! (P 6).

These comments show that the technical structure and the implementation of the program clearly have some flaws that need fixing. With more careful planning and technical guidance by the administrators of the program, they may be modified to relieve the instructors.

The other commonly mentioned weakness is related to the topics that the students are exposed in their daily news articles. Regional and cultural sensitivities, inappropriate format, and a lack of variety are expressed in participants' comments.

Who would teach an academic program using newspapers? It doesn't go in depth enough for what they need and also there is no overall plan for the vocabulary that they are learning. These are newspaper

articles, I tell my students there are different types of writing, and that there is a different organization and a format of a newspaper article versus and academic essay, versus a regular essay (P 2).

Participant 2 complains about the inappropriateness of the format of the material for academic English. The next two participants mention the content as a weakness rather than the format.

Another shortcoming of Achieve is the subjects. The topics of articles should be more relevant to our area, Arab and Muslim area and culture. Social, political and religious sensitivities should be considered because in this region religion is important (P 5).

When you put out a program like this, it has to go out to the masses, you cannot offend anyone...they have to be non-offensive, a little bit pleasant, positive and uplifting kind of thing...this person does this... this person gets this award... safe topics (P 4).

The program is written by an American company for American students, so this may be restricting the variety of topics. In the Middle East, students cannot associate with all the topics, and this seems to affect the effectiveness of the program according to some academics.

However, these flaws are related to the practical aspects of the program, not to the inherent nature of ICT. The other two weaknesses as perceived by participants seem to be more deeply rooted than the technical and content-topic problem. Particularly the plagiarism and manipulation problem concerning the program is so widespread that instructors suspect most of their students resort to some type of cheating while they are using the program.

I was pretty sure that some of my students were getting somebody else to do the articles for them outside class. Two students, when I asked them, they declined. But based on their scores when they took the level set and the progress they showed later on was not convincing (P 2)

You can't control cheating, or someone else doing the work for them, which I think has happened, there are definite signs of that. It is always one of the drawbacks with computer, internet based teaching... cheating and manipulating (P 4).

Participants are well aware of the cheating problem and express a concern for independent and flexible learning opportunities are being abused by some students, as expressed by 5 participants. Some students get other people to do the self-study work for them, and according to the Participant 4, this is partially due to the nature of ICT. Some participants tend to think ICT is quite susceptible to manipulation and cheating, therefore should be closely monitored by instructors.

Another problem related to the nature of ICT, rather than this specific program only, is related to the management of the course. Instructors seem to be confused about their roles in the classroom when they are implementing the program. Whether they should take attendance or run this course online, whether they should interfere while students are reading their articles, and basically what they should do in the classroom has been a topic of concern for some participants.

I sometimes feel "Am I teaching these kids? Or just spending time with them?" They are doing their own thing, I am doing my thing on the computer, and there is no interaction. ... They see it an easier way to spend time in class But I feel guilty, and useless, like an extra element when my students are doing Achieve. When they ask "Are we going to do class or is it going to be Achieve?", it feels bad (P 8).

I don't define teaching as sitting back and keeping track of things online... I am having trouble, combining independent learning with teacher-led instruction (P 4).

These two participants had problems about their roles in the classroom during the use of the program. What they were required to do was not what they are used to doing in the traditional lecturing method, so they mentioned this confusion as a challenge. Another participant probably had the same confusion and in an effort to solve this, s/he adopted a more flexible approach with attendance and assigned these online reading articles as homework.

I wasn't really sure on what method I should adopt with students, whether I should let them as frequently as they should, or be strict with attendance. But the nature of this course defies the need for perfect attendance, so I was a bit flexible with attendance (P 5).

ICT requires a learner-centric approach and maybe the problems experienced by some instructors result from the lack of practical experience that is required for a smooth shift from the traditional teacher-centric approach to the new approach where the focus is on the learner. Despite these positive comments about the contribution to reading skills, the program gets criticism from some participants as to not contributing enough to particularly students' writing skills.

The program didn't contribute to make them better writers, but in the course curriculum it says we are teaching writing. Combining reading with this program took away from our time to teach how to write (P 2).

In terms of writing I didn't feel they could really do much because the whole concept of writing in the program is a little mixed up. Sometimes they have to write summaries, sometimes narrative, sometimes creative writing, because this variation in questions was too quick, we couldn't deal with every aspect of writing skill in class there was nobody to guide them as to how to go about it (P 1).

Another criticism comes about the type of questions.

I don't know what they are learning with the activity questions. The program is mainly based on multiple choice activities; it is a very American skill. I was never asked multiple-choice as a student, we were asked short essays, long term papers, so this type seems funny to me (P 8).

It is apparent that the program has some weaknesses, as perceived by participants. However, a quote from a participant may reflect the general feeling of the faculty members towards the program: *"It is extremely effective with the reservation of the shortcomings. The writing part has some problems, but if the program allowed us to give better feedback for student written responses, it would be a whole system and improve writing skills better"* (P 5).

Findings Related to Participants' Perceptions regarding Students' Feedback

The third question that was posed to the participants was regarding the student feedback. Students' attitudes towards the program were questioned through faculty members' perspectives. Faculty members expressed that their perceptions towards student feedback depend on random student comments, their own observations and conversations in and outside the class and their deliberate questions about the usefulness of the program. Table 3 shows the answers given to this question.

Table 4: Perceptions regarding Students' Feedback

Student Feedback	Frequency
Positive – useful and motivating	6
Negative – too much work	4
Negative - boring	3

According to the participants, students' approach to the program is positive. They generally find the program motivating and useful in practicing their reading and writing skills. Some comments on this question elaborate on student feedback in detail.

Many of them told me personally and I know these are the students who actually worked on the program, not those laid back types, they said they benefitted from the program (P 1).

I like the program and most of my students do, too. My students tell me it has helped them a lot in improving their vocabulary and reading skills (P 3).

But they admit that it motivates them and makes them do more than what they would normally do (P 7).

These participants base their perceptions on direct student comments and mention that a majority of the students and particularly the ones who take it seriously benefit from the program. However, even the students who think the program contributes to their learning complain about the course load, as expressed by participants. As the program requires a certain number of reading and writing activities to be completed and the students who fail to reach that number lose points, it has also been a topic of complaint for students. Negative attitude towards the program mostly comes from that aspect, as exemplified in participants' comments:

Truthfully speaking, my students generally find it a chore. They say things like 'too much work', 'too much writing', if the teacher insists on essays, the students grumble. They think volume is too much; the

articles are too difficult, even if it set at their level, and they would rather something easier so they can answer the questions more easily and quickly (P 6).

One participant states his students complain about the program, but he has a different opinion on this complaint:

They all say it is too much work; they would rather do less work, but that's just typical laziness. They think it is too much work, but I don't think it is negative feedback (P 7).

If students think the program requires too much time and effort, this is not a very negative thing for teachers as long as students do the work. However, if the workload starts affecting the motivation levels and participation in the program, it may certainly hinder learning. Comments and responses to the question display that the positive feedback teachers receive outweighs the negative attitude about the workload. However, there are also some participants who received negative feedback about the articles and topics in these articles. According to these instructors, students think some of these reading texts are not interesting enough. Topics of articles have been an issue of weakness in some instructors' perspectives as well.

The ones that did it at the beginning that really tried hard said 'This is boring, the readings are boring' (P 4).

Some complain about the boring articles, some of them don't like technology, they hate having to do anything on the computer. But I think they are rare cases (P 8).

Still, participants do not seem to be negatively influenced by the negative feedback they get from their students. They think the program motivates most of them and it is very typical of students to complain about the tasks. As one participant puts it “*I don't get praises about the program but it is in the nature of the students*” (P 2).

Findings Related To Participants' Perceptions regarding the program's recommendability

When the participants were asked whether they would recommend the program to other users considering all the strengths and weaknesses, with the exception of two people, six of them said “yes”. One participant was not sure about the recommendability of the program, and one participant responded this question negatively. Participants were also asked to give reasons for their positive or negative responses. Table 5 below shows the frequencies of the participant comments, followed by some directly quoted comments from the participants.

Table 5: Perceptions regarding the program's recommendability

Would they recommend it	Frequency
Yes	6
No	1
Hesitant	1

I would definitely say yes, it adds variety to the curriculum. Most students enjoy reading things online. Not much formal maybe, but it helps their informal writing skills. However it puts a lot of work on the instructors, and sometimes it is difficult to keep track of students. But, if they want to use it, they should go ahead with that, it is highly useful, improves the quality of teaching and learning (P 3)

Despite his perceptions about the shortcomings of the program Participant 3 strongly believes the program is good for the variety in the classroom.

Another participant thinks this program balances the teacher's role in the classroom and independent learning, unlike some other participants who expressed some discomfort about their roles in the classroom while the students were working on their own:

It is the best thing out there; there is nothing as good as this. There are other programs that are good for reading but this program is the one that allows teacher to have control that we mark the writing. Otherwise it would purely be an automated reading thing that you wouldn't need a teacher. This one needs a teacher for the thought questions, the writing component, for giving feedback and grading. It is a good mix of self-use and teachers' input (P 7).

It is interesting how perceptions can differ even for the same program that is in question. This participant who seems to be experienced in ICT thinks there is room for teacher feedback in this program, unlike other programs which sometimes do not even require a teacher. However, for Participant 7, “grading and giving feedback” as the

only teacher input may not be disturbing, whereas for the other instructors who mentioned this very feature of the program as a weakness did not want to limit their roles and input to grading only, they expressed a desire to be more active in the classroom.

The participant who gave a negative response to this question made the following comment:

I wouldn't recommend because this program has nothing to do with their academic skills...also the program itself is not motivating the students enough (P 2).

The hesitant participant believes everything depends on the teacher's attitude towards the program and how seriously students are doing the work. Whether it is ICT or something else, these are the determinant factors, not which ICT tool is used.

The potential of the program totally depends on the teacher behind it. It has potential as far as the teachers know how to manipulate and use it. We can't really know how much they have improved, we can't know if they have done the work themselves, it all depends on students' desire to use it as a tool or just to get the grade in class. That scenario is the same whether it is ICT or not (P 4).

In fact, Participant 5 is touching upon the hottest issues in ICT, which has been a topic for many research papers. User, or more specifically teacher attitudes towards ICT indeed determines the success of ICT substantially, and whether it is traditional or innovative teaching methods applied in class, the teacher has the power to influence student attitudes towards ICT and the whole learning experience.

DISCUSSION

According to user perceptions, the major strengths of the program lie within its motivating factor, its differentiated instruction, and contributing to student learning by exposing them to a variety of activities that would be difficult to combine and find materials for in a traditional class. This finding about the increase in motivation has been mentioned and confirmed in many other studies that have been carried out in various settings. There seems to be general consensus that both teachers and students feel use of ICT greatly contributes to student motivation for learning. Students indeed find it more motivating to study with computers than with traditional means (Bullock, 2001). Marjaana Veermans and Anna Tapola reviewed four articles that focused on the general use of computers as integrated in the curriculum. They found that the pleasure and variety can keep students engaged and motivated. If ICT is carefully planned and pedagogically implemented, it can support relationships and motivation that in turn support long-lasting engagement and learning. ICT can be compelling, but only quality of curriculum programs in which the technology is implemented makes the real difference to students' attitudes, motivation, and performance. To conclude, there is evidence, from research, that technology can increase students' motivation for learning, but only if it is implemented in a pedagogically meaningful way (Veermans & Tapola, 2004).

Some participants also mentioned that the variety of materials, exercises, the amount of information they are exposed also contributes to some skills in English. However, despite thousands of impact studies, the impact of ICT use on student achievement is still difficult to measure and open to debate (Trucano, 2005). The positive impact of ICT use in education and its contribution to student learning has not been proven and just like this study, in studies that rely largely on self-reporting, users believe that ICTs make a positive difference and most users feel that using ICTs make them more effective learners. It is believed that specific uses of ICT can have positive effects on student achievement when ICTs are used appropriately to complement a teacher's existing pedagogical philosophies (Trucano, 2005).

Differentiated instruction has been expressed as one of the major strengths of the program. Differentiated instruction (DI) has become a hot topic in education and it can be defined as a modification of the curriculum that enables all students to learn (Theroux, 2004). Researchers identified three ways to modify the lesson plan in order to provide differentiated instruction; they are (a) differentiating the content (the "input" of teaching and learning), (b) differentiating the activities (the process of teaching and learning), and (c) differentiating the product (the output of teaching and learning). Thus, to meet each student's individual needs in the classroom, the teacher can provide differentiated learning by providing choice in either or all of the areas (Williams-Black, Bailey & Lawson, 2010). The ICT tool that has been the topic of this paper offers DI to its users in three ways, input, process and output of teaching and learning. With a level set exam taken at the beginning of the term, students are placed at a level and receive the material accordingly. Student progress is monitored regularly and if there is growth in the level, the adjustments are made monthly. This feature of the program is appreciated by the participants because they do not have to go through the effort of simplifying the content or the exercises. Thanks

to DI, students with different proficiency levels do not feel lost or neglected in the classroom and they remain occupied in the material. Research that has been carried out on DI suggests that through differentiated instruction and activities, students take a greater responsibility and ownership for their own learning via activities that are primarily focused on students' multiple intelligences, higher-order thinking, and learning styles. With this in mind, differentiated instruction is an effective tool to implement in the classroom in order to meet students' learning styles and multiple intelligences (Bailey & Williams-Black, 2008).

Differentiated instruction is especially beneficial to English language learners. English Language Learners (ELL) generally participate in general education curriculum and assessment and when students of with different heritages and linguistic backgrounds are included in traditional classrooms, teachers face a dilemma. DI may be the answer we have been looking for (Stanford and Reeves, 2009, p. 3). Lavadenz and Armas conducted research on differentiated instruction for English Language Learners, and found that allowing the students to engage in cooperative learning with flexible grouping allowed the students to partake in relevant, meaningful conversations about content in various ways and develop independence (Thompson & Valladares, 2011, p. 8). Tomlinson, Callahan, and Lelli carried out research on low socio-economic primary students over a four-year period and identified their learning preferences. In the end they observed growth expressed and achievement gains as compared to other schools in the same district when DI was used (Tomlinson, 2003). In parallel to these findings, the participants in this research tend to recognize the positive impact of differentiated instruction on student motivation and learning.

Participant perceptions regarding the program's weaknesses list some grading difficulties and technical problems they experience while using the program as ICT tool's number one weakness. Indeed, integration of ICT in the classroom is not a flawless one. Jones's study points out seven major barriers in this process and 'facing technical problems' was mentioned by 13% of participants and listed as the fifth barrier in the study. Another similar study carried out on the barriers revealed "lack of adequate technical support" as one of the issues teachers face during integration of ICT with %39.2 of the participants (Samuel & Zaitun, 2007, p. 2). The grading load, as mentioned by the participants in this study could be associated with time pressures both outside and during class, and the technical shortcomings could be linked to lack of support or recognition for integrating computers; and inadequate training and technical support, as described in many other studies carried out by various researchers (Bordbar, 2010, p. 33). The World Bank Group report on the use of ICT in education also state that introducing and using ICTs to support teaching and learning is time consuming for teachers, teaching with ICTs takes more time, approximately 10% extra time is required to cover the same material. Another point the report touches upon is that the functioning technical infrastructure is crucial and teachers must have adequate access to functioning computers, and be provided with sufficient technical support, if they are to use ICTs effectively (Trucano, 2005).

The second weakness of the ICT tool was considered to be plagiarism. Participants raised their concerns about students manipulating the placement test at the beginning of the term, copying and pasting internet sources or other students' responses for writing questions and even hiring others to do the homework for them. With the development of information and communication technology, plagiarism has become a serious problem in the academic community. According to the studies on academic plagiarism conducted at universities in four different European countries, plagiarism rates among students are quite high and students mostly ignore or allow plagiarism because of a lack of knowledge, lack of consequences, or simply because ICT makes plagiarism easy to commit. Over 70% of students reported that they used the internet as the main source of plagiarism and that the main reasons for committing plagiarism were easy and anonymous access to the internet, severe time constraints, procrastination, ineffective work management and work overload (Pupovac, Bilic-Zulle & Petroveck, 2008). It is suggested that easily accessible information on the internet, the development of IT and the simple copy/paste command facilitate plagiarism. However, some researchers do not see the Internet or ICT as primarily responsible for plagiarism, but its use and abuse by people. The failure of the academic community to engage properly with issues emerging from the new information world of which ICT is a significant part contributes substantially to plagiarism (Townley and Parsell, 2004). Rather than blaming ICT for Internet-enabled plagiarism, academics should build and sustain ethical relationships and academic virtues to nurture an intellectual community. Attempts at eradicating academic misconduct and rewarding creativity and real acquisition of knowledge in universities and schools will undoubtedly contribute to achieving this goal.

Participant perceptions reveal that the management of the course is a problem area and also some users have trouble adjusting to the new role in an ICT class. In fact, topic choice, grading problems, attendance issues could be all categorized under the management of the integration of ICT in the curriculum. These areas indicate that participants feel there are some problems regarding the management of the course. Planning is crucial when using ICTs and where little planning has occurred; research shows that student work is often unfocused and can

result in lower attainment (Trucano, 2005). The planning stage is recognized as particularly important for effective introduction of ICTs into the curriculum. According the UNESCO report, for a successful implementation, the teachers and the students' ability and ICT skills and the learning goals should be considered. For example, when purchasing or developing ICT materials, the following questions should be asked: Does the product meet institutional objectives? Does the product contribute to the aims and objectives of the course? Is the content current, unbiased, and politically and socially sensitive? Is the use of text and media appropriate for the needs and objectives of the course? Instructors need greater training than simple computer skills to be able to connect the potential of ICTs to the subject they are teaching. For real integration of ICTs into the teaching and learning process, teachers must be helped to understand how educational technology can inform and enhance pedagogy. In this regard, many experts emphasize continuous training as essential to teacher development, and a slow approach, expecting teachers to take anywhere between three and five years to fully adapt to the new technologies and related pedagogies. Similarly, collaboration between the institute and private software developers is seen as very effective in ensuring educational software remains locally relevant and tied to specific curricular objectives, both of which are important for encouraging teachers to make use of available ICT (Haddad & Rennie, 2005).

There is currently great debate about how teachers should adapt current teaching skills and practice to accommodate the introduction of ICT, whether teachers are becoming redundant as a consequence of the use of ICT in education or whether a teacher-less classroom is possible. In fact, new educational technologies do not curb the need for teachers but they call for a redefinition of their profession. This redefinition is involved with teaching methodology, assessment of learning, student tracking, communication, and evaluation. Most critically, the question of the extent to which teachers relinquish control and let learners drive their own learning may create the greatest barrier to the adoption of ICT in the classroom (Wheeler, 2000). The roles of teachers have changed and continue to change from that of instructors to that of constructors, facilitators, coaches, and creators of learning environments.

As to student feedback regarding the program, participants have generally expressed a positive attitude of students. Of course students complain about the workload, however, according to participants, the majority of them appreciate what ICT has to offer and enjoy the variety and flexibility the program provides. This finding has been supported by other research done to identify student attitude toward the integration of CALL into the curriculum. Student evaluation of a CALL based course in Sofia University in Bulgaria showed that the respondents had a highly positive attitude towards CALL implementations with respect to the skill development they perceived. Eliciting ideas on course improvements concerned mainly course materials and delivery methods: students would rather work without course books; they would like to have more up-to-date reading materials which confirms the value of authentic materials that e-learning environment provides (Kremenska, 2007). The study revealed that students' attitude towards the program indicated an enthusiastic student response. Furthermore, Almekhlafi's study carried out on elementary prep students in the UAE in 2006 shows that users had a positive attitude toward using CALL and had a high intention and satisfaction to use it in the future due to their perception of its utility and educational benefits. Results also showed a high self-perception of knowledge gain as a result of using CALL (Almekhlafi, 2006). Another study on Saudi university students demonstrate that students in general have a positive attitude toward the integration of CALL into the curriculum for teaching basic language skills in the institute where they were exposed to CALL for Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing skills (Bulut & AbuSeileek, 2009).

Participants as users of this program mostly said they would recommend this program mainly because it adds variety to the course by not making the teacher redundant in the class and allowing for a facilitator role. Despite few hesitations, participants generally display a positive attitude towards the use of this ICT tool in Academic English classes and the results show similarity to other research findings. A study in Ghana indicate that teaching staff in universities have relatively high and positive attitudes toward computer technology and ICT. The computer attitude is directly associated with affective, perceived usefulness, perceived behavioral control, and behavioral attitudes (Larbi-Apau & Moseley, 2012). Another study on Greek teachers of ELL conclude similar findings, teachers' attitude to technology is positive yet they believe that the ICT tools are time consuming and not teacher-friendly and they would like to use a foreign language platform that would improve ICT integration. Teachers are more likely to incorporate ICT use in their classroom if it is related to the nature of their instruction and are convinced that it is compatible with educational goals (Dogoriti & Pange, 2012).

CONCLUSION

This study was carried out under several limitations. Interviewing eight participants in a private university setting in Kuwait about a specific type of an ICT tool is certainly one of them. Findings of this study therefore

can only be generalized for a similar group of participants. Also, since the program is relatively new in the university, these could be interpreted as preliminary findings regarding the perceptions of instructors.

For being able to fully assess the online program, more comprehensive investigation with larger numbers of individuals is needed. Further studies can utilize students so as to provide a broader picture of the status of integration of ICT into the curriculum and computer attitudes and skills among the students and teachers in Kuwait. Using different demographic groups, researchers can also examine the possibility of differences that may occur between the male and female students and also among students with different majors. A quantitative research design will surely provide valuable insights as to student perceptions.

This is a recent implementation in the institute and instructors have just started to form their attitudes and perceptions of the program. They are in constant contact with the program administrators and as they voice their concerns about the content, management and some technical shortcomings of the program and more importantly as they continue with their professional development conferences in ICT and gain experience in ICT, their perceptions will continue to change and another research may be necessary to evaluate how the integration of the program has evolved within a certain period of time.

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